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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [UN](#) [LE](#) [FR](#)
SUBJECT: FRENCH CONCERNS OVER ISRAELI OVERFLIGHTS

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, Reason 1
.4 B/D

¶1. (C) French military and civilian contacts have recently expressed serious concern to us over Israeli overflights over French UNIFIL forces, most notably the "buzzing" of French navy vessels off the coast of Lebanon on or about 25 September and on a few occasions since. According to DATT and MFA contacts, the Israeli planes did not follow proper IFF procedures. MOD Deputy Diplomatic Advisor Arnaud de Pellegars said the overflights had been termed as "provocative," given their excessive closeness to French vessels. The MOD's Military Cabinet advisor informed the DATT that Defense Minister Alliot-Marie would seek U.S. assistance in getting the Israelis to desist from the overflights in her scheduled October 19 meeting with the Secretary of Defense.

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¶2. (C) De Pellegars and MFA Lebanon desk officer Remy Bouallegue said France had protested the buzzing incidents by demarching, in conjunction with the Italians, the Israeli mission to the UN, and by doing a parallel demarche in Jerusalem. The MFA and the MOD consider the incident closed. The French military, while viewing Israeli overflights as dangerous and provocative, is not treating them as hostile (septel DATT reporting to follow). That said, the MFA believes the incident underscores the importance of ending overflights. Bouallegue cited the following arguments:

-- France objects to overflights in principle because they are a violation of UNSCR 1701.

-- France also objects for political reasons because overflights weaken the government of PM Siniora, which serves none of our interests.

-- From a military/strategic point of view, Hizballah no longer poses an immediate threat to Israel and so there is little or no military justification for the overflights.

-- Finally, Hizballah may seize upon the overflights as an excuse for dodging its own responsibilities under UNSCR 1701, and to make the argument to the Lebanese people that the international community is weak and that UNIFIL cannot truly protect Lebanon against Israel.

¶3. (C) Separately, MFA DAS-equivalent Director for the Levant Herve Besancenot told us that in addition to the joint French

and Italian demarches, the MFA had convoked the Israeli ambassador in Paris to stress that the ship-buzzing episode was unacceptable. The MFA complained to him that the aircraft had not respected rules of friend/foe identification. Besancenot said the Israelis responded by referring the GOF to the IDF. (Comment: While not clarified, we assume the Israeli Ambassador was referring UNIFIL to its liaison office with the IDF.) According to Besancenot, the French nonetheless made it clear to the Israelis that this event was "not appreciated." Besancenot stressed that from a legal standpoint, he did not think the Israelis have a leg to stand on -- the overflights are a clear violation of Lebanese sovereignty and contrary to UNSCR 1701. However, he indicated that the French can understand the security rationale that has traditionally driven Israeli overflights.

¶4. (C) Besancenot also shared with us two French suggestions for avoiding further such incidents in the near term:

-- an immediate halt to overflights of Beirut (because sonic booms cause destruction, get the population stirred up, and weaken the Siniora); and,

-- the United States could provide satellite imagery to supplement Israeli intelligence, thereby obviating the need for overflights.

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